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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIJING 022842

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [CH](#)  
SUBJECT: BLACKBOARD BUNGLE: BEIJING SCHOOL CLOSINGS UPSET  
MIGRANTS

Classified By: Political Section Internal Unit Chief Susan A. Thornton.  
Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

#### Summary

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11. (C) The Beijing city government's decision to shut down dozens of independent schools catering to migrant children has been a contentious topic among principals, scholars and the media this fall. Although relaxed residence permit rules now allow the children of Beijing's surging migrant worker population to attend public schools alongside their urban counterparts, bureaucratic burdens and arbitrary fees force many students into private schools of varying quality designed specially for migrant children. Our contacts said a thirst for new revenue is the authorities' main motivation, adding that the public schools are keen to collect fees from students who were previously outside the system. Migrant activists downplayed rumors that the shutdowns presage a campaign to sweep the mobile labor force out of Beijing prior to the 2008 Olympics. Nonetheless, the closings have angered migrants. One principal's protest ended in violence. Sociologists worry that youths facing poor education and employment prospects could form the foundation of a new underclass, posing a threat to social stability. End Summary.

#### Order Affects Thousands of Students

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12. (C) The Beijing City Government's July 12 directive to shut down unregistered schools is affecting tens of thousands of students, many of them the children of migrant workers. Media reports indicate that some 370,000 migrant children live in Beijing, of whom about 280,000 attend privately run schools. Our contacts told us these numbers are almost certainly low. While reliable statistics are hard to come by, principals and representatives of NGOs that work with migrants estimated that there are 700,000 to 800,000 migrant children in the capital. Calling for the "strengthening and standardization of the security situation at unsanctioned schools for migrant worker children," the order specified that Beijing's district authorities must reduce enrollment at some schools, bring other schools up to city standards so they can be officially accredited -- and close down the rest.

13. (C) The biggest obstacle to accreditation is schools' inability to meet city standards for playground space, but classroom size and teachers' qualifications are also problems, said Wang Kan (protect), a program officer at Oxfam Beijing who

works with migrant advocacy groups. The independent schools charge about RMB 700, or USD 90, per semester per student, slightly less than a migrant worker's average monthly wage. Some migrants can enroll their children in regular Beijing schools if they can afford out-of-district tuition and other administrative fees. By law, migrant students are entitled to tuition waivers at public schools. But in reality, the bureaucratic hurdles are so high that only a handful meet the qualification requirements. To be found eligible, migrant parents must provide volumes of paperwork, including among others a) a work permit or proof of salary and b) proof of address in Beijing. Given the general lack of written labor contracts, along with the informal nature of most rental agreements, both documents are hard for most migrants to produce. One NGO involved in migrant issues told Wang that not a single family they work with has succeeded in obtaining a tuition waiver from the Beijing government.

#### Filling Coffers and Classrooms

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14. (C) Our contacts said one of the city's main motivations for imposing the new rules is money. With thousands of pupils enrolled outside the public school system, education officials see a loss of potential revenue, said Li Qiang (protect), Dean of the School of Humanities at Tsinghua University. Although primary school education is officially free throughout China, in reality schools levy a raft of fees to cover the cost of textbooks, sports equipment and other items. Moreover, schools in some districts of Beijing are not filled to capacity because of the effects of

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the one-child policy, Li said, adding that the directive amounts to a clumsy attempt to boost enrollment. An article on the school closings in the influential biweekly Caijing Magazine by Ren Bo, an expert on rural-urban migration issues, reinforced this point. Ren wrote that under-enrolled schools are not located in areas where migrants live. For example, about 2,000 migrant children reside near the independent Xingzhi Hope Primary School in Beijing's Haidian District. But the local public school closest to Xingzhi Hope, Tangjiafeng Primary School, can only accommodate 600 students.

#### An Olympic Facelift?

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15. (C) Beyond a thirst for new sources of funding, politics and face motivate the Beijing City Government, said Wang Yi (protect), former principal of the New Millennium primary school, which was shuttered in September. Wang speculated that three main considerations are driving the directive:

-- Safety issues. There are legitimate concerns about safety and sanitation standards because many independent schools are overcrowded and occupy the shabbiest buildings, which offer cheap rent, Wang said.

-- Fear of losing promotions or being held accountable. Local-level cadres are convinced that no matter how spotless their records, one disaster can cost a promotion or even one's scalp, Wang related. (Note: In the wake of a flood at a primary school that killed more than 80 students in June 2005 in Heilongjiang Province, 10 police and party officials were imprisoned for negligence. A July 2006 notice from the Ministry of Education stated that school principals and local education officials would be held

responsible in the event of serious accidents. End note.)

-- An Olympic facelift. Wang said city officials are under pressure to tidy the city for the 2008 Games. A cleanup of dilapidated, substandard schools catering to the country's have-nots would deprive foreign journalists of a story that might portray China in an unflattering light.

¶16. (C) Our contacts dismissed the idea that the school closings signal the incipient stages of a "sweep" meant to clear the city of migrants before the Olympics. "Migrant workers are tough," said Wei Wei (protect), founder of Little Bird, an NGO that advocates on behalf of migrant workers. It would take a lot more than closing down a few schools to get migrants to move out of Beijing. Besides, Wei Wei added that without the mobile labor force, the Olympic venues would not be completed on time.

#### Erratic and Violent Enforcement

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¶17. (C) Against this backdrop, authorities are enforcing the order inconsistently, Wang Yi said, adding that district officials have not revealed how they make decisions about closings. Until last summer, he was principal of the independent New Millennium School. In July, Haidian district officials informed him that the city requires a school to have an operating budget of at least RMB 150,000 (USD 18,750) and a minimum amount of space for the physical plant, among other qualifications. New Millennium met some of the benchmarks but not others, and no one conducted an inspection, Wang related. To his surprise, the Haidian district government ordered the school closed, shutting out some 430 students and 19 teachers. The facility was subsequently bulldozed. At the same time, many schools in Beijing that have received orders to shut their doors continue to conduct classes without consequence, Ren Bo reported in Caijing.

¶18. (C) But remaining open carries risks. Wang related that southwest Beijing's Daxing district, whose inexpensive housing attracts many migrants, has taken especially harsh measures to implement the July order. One school principal, an acquaintance of Wang's, refused to suspend classes and arrived at school one morning to find the front gate padlocked. After the principal held class outside the gate

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anyway, "some thugs came and beat him up," causing serious injuries, Wang reported. Wang said he suspects the Daxing district government is behind the attack.

#### An Angry Reaction

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¶19. (C) Migrants and educators have reacted angrily to the directive and the closings. "The policy is a mistake," charged Wei Wei of Little Bird. He said many parents have approached him requesting advice on what to do with children whose schools have been shuttered. Little Bird is urgently trying to find places for students in private and public schools around the city. Separately, Wang said a group of independent school principals has met regularly in recent weeks and has put together a proposal to establish special standards for private institutions. The standards would be lower and would reflect those in place in smaller provincial cities and towns. The group intends to submit the proposal to the Beijing

Government in the coming weeks. "We want to start a dialogue with the city government," Wang said, acknowledging that often such communication can be a challenge, especially for migrants who are not even legal residents.

#### Social Risks Abound

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¶10. (C) Engaging in a discussion with the Beijing authorities will be an uphill struggle, said Li of Tsinghua. Officials do not care about migrants, who

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are considered the very lowest level of society. In Li's view, the city should have developed a comprehensive plan ensuring that migrant pupils all are guaranteed enrollment in public schools. Instead, we see at least hundreds of kids either a) on the streets or b) crammed into other schools. City authorities are not worried about mistreating migrants because there is a huge reservoir of workers who are ready to flow into the city to replace them, Li maintained. But the danger exists that these youths, facing poor education and employment prospects, could form the foundation of a new underclass and pose a threat to social stability, he commented.

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